**Remarks**
**at the**
**NASA 50th Anniversary Gala**

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Thank you, Leon, and thanks to all of you for being here tonight. This is indeed a very special evening, with very special guests. When I think about following John Glenn and Neil Armstrong at the podium, it can be a little intimidating. I have to remind myself that, really, all I'm doing is following a guy who was a former contestant on "Name That Tune", and another guy who was once a deputy associate administrator for aeronautics at NASA. That's not really such a big deal, right?

Every astronaut who ever flew with us, whether a U.S. astronaut or not, was invited to this celebration, but none with greater accomplishments than John and Neil. The demands on their time are voracious. They are very, very public people because of what they have done, and they have borne the burdens of those public lives with a level of grace and equanimity to which most of us can only aspire. I want to thank both of them for being here tonight.

One thing that is very enjoyable about our 50th birthday, our 50th anniversary, is that we're still young enough to be able to interact with those who made us what we are, not only our astronauts, but also those whose contributions were made on the ground. We're still young enough to be able to interact with many of those who started out with us. For me, in my career, to have been mentored and taught by such people has been one of the greatest benefits I've experienced.

It is an honor to be here tonight. I'm doing the job to which I aspired as a child. Many of you have heard me say that I was interested in space, and space travel, before there was a *Sputnik*. I watched with bated breath as those who were a few years older put dreams into practice, as we saw in the videos that were shown earlier. It is a thrill for me to be leading the agency today, despite the many trials and tribulations that come with the job.

As noted by our Master of Ceremonies, it is also Rebecca's and my 14th wedding anniversary. So, thanks to all of you for coming here tonight to help celebrate it with us. Finally, I can't leave the theme of anniversaries without mentioning that it's also the birthday of someone who is a dear friend and close colleague to many of us, John Young. Today is John's 78th birthday. I wish he could have been here with us tonight. I have said before that John Young befriended me before I was anybody, something I have always very much appreciated.

I think that NASA today is doing well, and I believe the evidence before us supports that claim. We're in the final stages of completing the International Space Station, a task much tougher than we ever thought it would be for many reasons lying entirely outside the technical arena, but we're getting it done. And when we are done, it will be a scientific and engineering accomplishment beyond anything yet achieved by the human race.

We soft-landed a spacecraft on Mars for only the third time in history, just this past Memorial Day. It was as exciting an event as I have ever been able to witness. As we sit here today, we still have two rovers exploring Mars. I spoke the other day with one of the folks who earns his living by driving a rover on Mars. It's a tough job, but somebody has to do it…

The Dawn spacecraft is on the way to the major asteroids in the asteroid belt. We have no idea what we'll learn there, but we can be certain that we'll learn things that surprise us. New Horizons is on its way to Pluto, while MESSENGER is on its way to Mercury. And STEREO, a pair of spacecraft twins, are on their way to positions where they can image the sun simultaneously from opposing vantage points to learn how the engine which drives our climate behaves. Regarding our climate, we are being observed by more Earth satellites than I can count, among them Aqua and Terra, the latter having been managed by the man who is today NASA's Associate Administrator, Chris Scolese.

So NASA is doing well. I think we will continue to do well. Elsewhere, I have written that if we can stay the course outlined by our present civil space policy, and with our present budget in constant, inflation-adjusted dollars, when it comes time to have that 100th birthday that Neil spoke of, we can be looking back on the 20th anniversary of the first Mars landing. It's possible with the technology we can envision and it's possible with our budget. But it requires that we act with unusual persistence for Americans, that we stay true to what we believe are the proper goals for our agency into our children's and grandchildren's time.

There are lessons available today to show what happens when we lose that focus. As I say, we are doing very well today, but as you walk out of this museum, I would like you to take a look at the SR-71 aircraft on display in the back. We don't have one of those anymore.

Tonight, I'm wearing a tie which shows an astronaut in a Manned Maneuvering Unit flying around in space. It also shows an Apollo lander on the moon, and there are two other Apollo spacecraft also depicted. We don't have any of those things any more either. You can go see them in museums.

Now, there's nothing odd about looking at forty-year-old hardware in museums, and admiring it and respecting it and respecting those who brought it into being. Indeed, that's why we have museums. We should do that. What looks easy to us today was not easy the first time it had to be done. But as far as I am aware, only in the field of American aerospace can we go to a museum and look at certain artifacts and wish that we could still do as well. And that observation should be sobering to everyone here, in my opinion.

Next week, if their plans go well, the Chinese will launch their first three-man spacecraft. At that moment, they will outnumber both the Americans and the Russians in space. In fact, there will be as many Chinese in space as there are Russians and Americans put together. Good for the Chinese. I will cheer for them. I wish them well. But I also I wish that we were more prominently numbered among those who are in space, and that we were reaching farther and doing more.

In contrast, the victory that I am striving for as we sit here tonight is the passage in Congress of a waiver allowing me to use U.S. tax dollars to purchase seats on the Russian *Soyuz* to take our astronauts, and those of our other partners, to the space station that we have built. And, despite how awful it sounds, it *is* a victory because all of the other outcomes are worse. That's the situation in which we find ourselves, because of what the Columbia Accident Investigation Board referred to as a sustained loss of vision for the American space program and what it should be.

I became Administrator at the best of times, and the worst of times, at NASA. It is the best of times because of the opportunity to make positive changes, and I think we're doing that. I think the team that we have put together is doing it very well, indeed. I'm immensely proud of them. But here tonight, on our 50th anniversary, we are *not* celebrating the 20th anniversary of the first landing on Mars, and we could have. We lost focus. We forgot that not everything worth doing can be summarized on an Excel spreadsheet and offered up for a cost-benefit analysis. I hope that in the next fifty years we can hug that understanding to our bosom, and then those who stand here in this museum in fifty years, can look down on the crowd and say "isn't it incredible to have a base on Mars?"

Thank you.

*Ed. Note: These remarks were slightly edited from the original transcript for grammar and syntax.*